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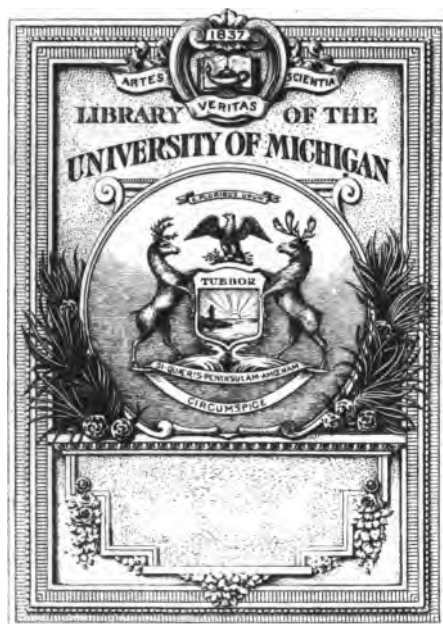
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INFLUENCE OF LITERATURE

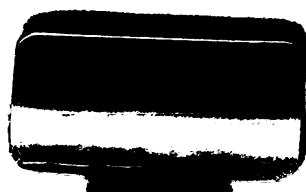
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THE MORAL INFLUENCE  
OF LITERATURE 35-105.  
CLASSICAL EDUCATION IN  
THE PAST AND AT PRESENT

Two Popular Addresses

BY

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## THE MORAL INFLUENCE OF LITERATURE<sup>1</sup>

IN choosing this subject for an evening lecture, I need hardly say that I had no thought of attempting to exhaust it; still less did I suppose that I had anything new to say. An hour is a very short time to give to a great subject on which much has already been said and written. On the other hand, a great subject has this advantage over a small one, that it invites more attention and stimulates more interest, and thus the points to which one can attract notice in a short time are more likely to remain in the memory, and suggest reflection afterwards.

<sup>1</sup> A Lecture delivered at Toynbee Hall, October, 1889.



(1) It is hardly superfluous to ask—What is literature? We are apt to think of literature as the contents of books, and books as an affair of ink and paper, half, if not altogether, dead ; something removed from the real life of the world. And no doubt it is true that a mere knowledge of books is not the same as a knowledge of life and of the world ; it is not the same thing, and it is a very inadequate substitute for it. But look at the matter a little more closely, and one sees that the line is drawn too rigidly. For books are, after all, nothing more or less than voices speaking to us—not the voices merely of our own friends and contemporaries, but of a long line of past generations ; human life that has escaped the grave, still appealing to us for our homage, our love, our sympathy, our condemnation, or our abhorrence. Literature is a voice ; and what is there that its message does not contain if we will listen ?

But we must add a word more. Literature is the voice of those who can speak. The addition means something. The writer of books is one who has the gift of utterance. Not by any means, on that account, a greater or better man than his fellows ; for some of the greatest men—Socrates, for instance, and Cromwell—were comparatively inarticulate, and thousands of others who have taken a great part in making social and political history have died without leaving a word behind them. There is a great deal of life which never finds its way into books or speeches at all. But the gift of utterance is a special talent, sometimes associated with greater qualities, sometimes not so ; sometimes even bound up with mean qualities, and depending apparently on a defect of moral nature. Great powers of imagination are usually connected with great powers of expression ; but imaginative genius, as every one knows, does not always

carry with it what is generally understood to be a sound moral constitution.

Literature, then, being, in its length and breadth, the voice of those who are more able to speak addressing those who are less able, the moral effect of their message must depend on what they have to say ; and this, again, must depend on the moral force that is in them, and the degree in which it has moved them to speak. Their gift of utterance may be inseparably linked with some weakness or defect of nature ; and thus it may happen—indeed, very often it does happen—that the literature of a particular generation gives but an inadequate idea of the best part of its life.

(2) We are talking, somewhat too glibly perhaps, about morality and moral force. So, at the risk of being tedious, I must define the sense in which I am going to use the words in this lecture. I will say then at once that by morality I do not mean the mere

passive obedience which we render to law and social prescription. If the be-all and end-all of life were summed up in the one duty of doing what we were told by the powers ruling in the state or in society ; if our whole aim were to live, not in conscious and active sympathy with the natural principles out of which law and prescription have in the long run arisen, but in a mere enforced conformity to law and prescription, we should have a society like that of ancient Sparta or the Geneva of Calvin. Literature would not be needed ; the book of the law would be enough, and we should have accepted a dilemma like that attributed to the Mohammedan conqueror of Alexandria, " If these writings of the Greeks agree with the book of God, they are useless and need not be preserved ; if they disagree, they are pernicious and ought to be destroyed." This feeling still exists widely, and always has existed, but it has been overruled by the

instinct of moral and intellectual progress. For morality consists not in an imposed but in a free conformity; in a free conformity to law and prescription so far as they are themselves based upon the moral impulse which has given them birth, and which they are there to protect.

I have no claim to speak as a philosopher, and therefore this moral impulse may, for my present purpose, be defined as the spontaneous tendency which exists in human beings to live and act for each other's well-being. I am not concerned to go further than this, for my only object now is to lay stress on the fact that, in my opinion, no action can properly be called moral unless it is freely unselfish, done for the love of another without fear of punishment or hope of reward. If a man asks for a fee for not killing his father, his abstention from parricide cannot be called a moral act.

(3) What, then, are the principal and the most obvious manifestations of this natural or spontaneous tendency? Deep down in the laws of Nature herself is rooted the love of parent for child and child for parent; out of this, organized by custom and developed by the constant enlarging of the social sphere, has gradually arisen the social spirit which now more than ever is felt around and among us, animating all the better part of modern life. On the active side of human life its work is evident, and need not be dwelt upon, especially in this place; on another side it has inspired the love of truth, the determination to hold fast to intellectual honesty, which is a far rarer and more difficult virtue, especially in a democratic society, than the practice of philanthropy.

(4) What, then, is the effect of literature in encouraging and developing this great social force?

I would answer, generally, that litera-

ture is powerful rather to encourage than to create moral action. For literature is in itself, to a large extent, produced by the moral impulse, and the stream cannot rise higher than its source. On the other hand, I believe that bad literature does not so much create vice as encourage it. I think that Milton was in the main right when he said that you may banish all objects of lust, and yet that you will not thereby make those chaste that are not so already ; that Macaulay was in the main right when he said that men are not so much corrupted by books as by the course of the world. I know that there are many persons, better qualified than I am to speak on this matter, who would attribute to books a more powerful influence than I think they, on the whole, possess. My own belief is that bad literature, in the main, is created by the demand for it. "Whatsoever from without goeth into a man, it cannot defile him ; . . .

that which proceedeth out of the man, that defileth the man." If the bad book were not wanted, there would be no sale for it.

Not that this in any way lessens the responsibility of its author, whose conscience may one day be rudely awakened by the thought that he has been doing his best to encourage the forces of destruction.

(5) We are now naturally brought to consider what classes of literature have had, and are most likely to have, a direct effect in encouraging the moral impulse within us.

There is much literature the effect of which is good, but which may best be described as non-moral. I mean all such writing as embodies the spirit of greatness and sublimity. The greatest works, it must be said, are great; they are not moral. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the tragedies of *Æschylus*, *Sophocles*, and *Euripides*, the *Æneid*, the *Divine*



Comedy, the tragedies of Shakespeare, the Faust,—these are creations of a scope and grandeur which place them beyond any special human interest. So far as the perceptions and imagination of man can, under the limitations imposed upon him by the surroundings of his time, compass the whole length, breadth, height, and depth of his existence, can rise to its greatest capabilities and sound its lowest baseness ; not less than this is the measure of the power which these monuments reveal. They are like Nature herself; we lose ourselves in them, are absorbed in awe and wonder at the magnificent vision. The sense of elemental power and beauty is borne in upon us ; the sense of something all and more than all than we are. Many persons would, I dare say, assert that the impression is a moral one. Ruskin, for instance, is always endeavouring to impress upon us the ethical bearings and meaning of art ; and what is true of art, of painting,

or of music, is still truer of literature. I believe, however, that it is a mistake to identify the sphere of morals with that of great art. The common sense of mankind refuses to do so, and the course of life, as we observe it, supports the common sense of mankind. We say commonly, "He was a great artist, and also a good man;" or, "A great artist, but not a good man." But it is fair to say also that the study of great art, and the absorption of life in it, whether the study be creative or merely imitative, works negatively in the moral direction. The condition of mind which is necessary to produce great works of art, or to study them with sympathy, is one which is incompatible with baseness of intention, or a mean absorption in petty interests. If such baseness be there, the work will suffer: do we not feel this in the case of Byron? Without charity, even genius becomes as sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal.

It would seem, then, that while the study of great literature is good and ennobling, as drawing the mind upwards and bracing it to the consideration of sublimity and beauty, it cannot be said to have an actively moral effect. The same is true of the intellectual element in all works of art. By the intellectual element I mean not merely what may be called the intellectual contents, the intellectual significance, of such works, but the workmanship, the mechanical appliances by which such significance is brought home to us. Good workmanship is an absolute necessity to good literature. I only wish that English writers understood this as well as their French brethren. If Browning would have taken the trouble to write like Swinburne, how much more might he have done for us! But workmanship is not a moral matter, except in so far as it requires a habit of mental concentration in the worker.

(6) It may seem as if I were excluding from the sphere of ethics the best things in literature—the writings to which we most naturally turn for relief and refreshment. But much is left, and I will speak first of a branch of literature which is not, perhaps, accessible to many, or at least not approached by them—the literature of philosophy, of history, of science, and of research in general.

I would observe, before going any further, that in my opinion knowledge is a moral force, and cannot be too clearly recognized as such; and that consequently the acquisition and diffusion of knowledge is a duty, for the performance of which those who are able to devote themselves to it are seriously responsible. I am not speaking of the acquisition of knowledge pursued by individuals for their own pleasure, of the striving after culture for its own sake, of the intellectual life as a beauti-

ful thing. These things may be good or not; but they have a tendency to form intellectual epicures, and at best should probably be characterized as non-moral. I am speaking of the diffusion of knowledge—the spreading of the truth, so far as man can at any given time ascertain it, in its broad social effects, in its bearing on the life of nations. Now, I would wish to emphasize the fact that the pursuit of knowledge acts in more ways than one upon the character both of individuals and of peoples. To begin with, it sets before the individual the lofty ideal of harmonizing human life with fact, and thus improving and gladdening it in all its aspects and relations. This, throughout all the din and smoke of the thousand heart-rending conflicts which have stained the pages of history with blood, may be discerned to be the real end after which the great leaders of philosophical and religious thought have

at all times and in all places been striving. Need I speak of the discipline and qualities necessary to the right living of such a life? the renunciation of individual caprice; the training of the mind's eye to bear the light; the purity of motive; above all, the courage? As Goethe profoundly says, the most perilous service of all is the service of man.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, in a democratic society, with its tendency towards equality of condition and a uniform level of comfort, with its encouragement of sympathy and sentiment, I sometimes think that the virtue of intellectual honesty runs more danger of being sapped than in a ruder state of civilization. It is a good thing to love one's neighbour, but a bad thing to fear him; and we are constantly running the risk of regarding the truth of

<sup>1</sup> "Will'st du viele befrei'n, so wag' es vielen zu dienen;  
Wie gefährlich das sei, will'st du es wissen?  
Versuch's."

what we are saying less than the effect which we think it will produce. It is well for the philosopher, the historian, the savant, and the scholar to remember that he owes more, perhaps, to posterity than to his contemporaries.

But there is another way in which morality is affected by knowledge. Cruelty is born, to a large extent, of fear, and everything which tends to diminish fear tends to diminish cruelty. Now, of all the agencies which diminish fear, knowledge is perhaps the most powerful. In the great struggle in which mankind is perpetually engaged with Nature, it is the progress of knowledge which enables him to win for himself, inch by inch, a freer and stronger position, to gain constantly new points of vantage, from which the light that he has with him shines further, and the shadows that have been terrifying him vanish into nothingness. His new acquisition is not to be measured only

by the advance he has made in material prosperity, in inventive power, in the command of new mechanical appliances for bringing ease and comfort to his outer life. He has won something better than this, namely, a surer apprehension of the laws of his own existence, a knowledge which acts as a force conservative of the conditions which maintain life, and as a force destructive of the conditions which impair it; which dissolves the antagonisms and hatreds born of terror, and acts in conformity with all the great charitable powers out of which Nature, even without the aid of widely extended knowledge, is ceaselessly active in building up human society.

(7) Philosophy, the highest of all forms of literature, represents the highest endeavour of the human spirit after knowledge. The study of philosophy, then, in the works of its greatest masters, is, of all the intellectual aids to moral



life, the most effective. There is nothing like it for bracing the mind, for raising it upwards, for realizing that mastery over circumstance which the spirit of man has always claimed as its birthright. Will it be said that theology does this better than philosophy? I would answer that the comparison is mistaken; that theology, so far as it is true, is no more than philosophy assuming a special character and attitude under special historical conditions. Will it be said, again, that philosophy necessarily leads to pessimism? If so, it is a partial philosophy, an imperfect synthesis.

(8) The course of history shows that this is no piece of *a priori* dogmatism. What are the great moral forces upon which European civilization, as we know it, is founded? The answer would be, I suppose, the system of social ethics derived from the Jews, improved and extended by Christianity, and the intellectual impulse derived from the

Greeks. But this answer, though true in the main, is put in a form which somewhat misrepresents the facts.

We owe to the Greeks, as well as to Christianity, much of our ordinary ethics. No doubt the most striking and obvious characteristic of Greek literature is its presentation to us of great personalities or types of humanity—Achilles, Empedocles, Pericles, Socrates, Aristotle, Alexander. We think of Greek society as imperfect on the political and moral side, and as giving us examples rather of individual power and harmonious self-development. This judgment is partial, as being based mainly on our reading of the great classical monuments of Greek literature. We forget the schools of the philosophers, which for the three centuries before the Christian era kept up an unbroken tradition of healthy moral practice in the face of an imperfectly instructed society, and developed ideas which on the one hand came

into fruitful contact with the religious doctrines of the Jews, and on the other hand inspired a new and inner life into the developed social and political organization of the Roman empire.

(9) Seldom, if ever, has philosophy and the spirit of progressive intellectual inquiry been more fruitfully alive than during those three centuries. Much was done in them, not merely in the way of gathering literary knowledge and advancing physical science, but in consolidating the foundations of moral conduct. Yet, when all is said, there is wanting in Greek literature, as a whole, the element of sweetness and wholeness which meets us in that of the Jews. I am sorry to say that I am no Hebrew scholar, and have, therefore, no right to speak of the Old Testament, except as an ordinary reader might speak of it. But I think that even a superficial reader of the Hebrew prophets must be struck with the fact that they

appeal to a people which knows and understands, in a special manner, the sanctity of family ties, the love of father and mother, wife and child. The wife is not a nonentity in the household, but the husband's love is for her, body and soul. How beautiful is the constant image under which the God of the Hebrews is represented as the lover and the husband of His people! "Thus wast thou decked with gold and silver; and thy raiment was of fine linen, and silk, and brodered work; thou didst eat fine flour, and honey, and oil: and thou wast exceeding beautiful, and thou didst prosper unto royal estate. And thy renown went forth among the nations for thy beauty: for it was perfect, through the majesty which I had put upon thee, saith the Lord God. . . . Thou hast built thy lofty place at every head of the way, and hast made thy beauty an abomination. . . . How weak is thine heart, saith

the Lord God, seeing that thou doest all these things! . . . A wife that committeth adultery! that taketh strangers instead of her husband! . . . Nevertheless I will remember my covenant with thee in the days of thy youth, and I will establish unto thee an everlasting covenant."<sup>1</sup> Can Greek or Latin literature show anything like this?

Or, again, will you find, in Greek and Latin literature, such sympathy for the poor and suffering as is expressed over and over again in the Hebrew prophets and psalms? "Hear this, O ye that would swallow up the needy, and cause the poor of the land to fail, saying, When will the new moon be gone, that we may sell corn? and the sabbath, that we may set forth wheat? making the ephah small, and the shekel great, and dealing falsely with balances of deceit; that we may buy the poor for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes, and

<sup>1</sup> Ezek. xvi. 13, 14, 25, 30, 32, 60.

sell the refuse of the wheat? The Lord hath sworn by the excellency of Jacob, Surely I will never forget any of their works. Shall not the land tremble for this, and every one mourn that dwelleth therein?"<sup>1</sup>

(10) A national literature is the offspring of the national life, and its moral influence will be strong in proportion to the moral forces which are the spring of that life. The position which the Bible has held as a religious book, as an inspired record of events, and as an oracle of conduct, has varied in past times among different Churches, and will continue to vary as fresh light is thrown by scholarship upon its historical narratives, and upon the true meaning of its moral and religious utterances. Its real influence, however, will not be impaired so long as it is apparent that large portions of it, at least, are based upon a clearer apprehension of the universal laws of

<sup>1</sup> Amos viii. 4-8.

moral progress than existed among any nation of antiquity except the Jews. So long as this is admitted, all questions affecting the date and authorship of particular books will, however they are determined, produce no effect upon the ethical position of the Bible. The value of the historical record may be differently estimated; the value of the moral record does not depend on time, place, or writer.

(11) To pass from the Bible to works of modern fiction may seem to you a piece of unpardonable bathos. But one can hardly exaggerate, nowadays, the power for good or evil which is exercised by the novelist. The Ten Commandments, the Catechisms, even the Sermon on the Mount, are learned by heart and forgotten, or, if the words are not forgotten, they become conventional and cease to convey an effective meaning. But the influence of novels pervades the whole of modern society in its length

and breadth. Children are brought up upon stories ; the majority of women, when they have leisure for reading, devote it to reading works of fiction. I have heard it said that in England alone a new novel is written for every day in the year ; in a single year some three hundred and fifty romances.

Let us try to lay our finger upon the main objects which a novelist should aim at securing, if his books are to have a genuine moral effect. I assume what is taken for granted in France, and ought to be taken for granted in England, that he spends the utmost pains on his workmanship. His writing should, then, if there is anything in what has been said already, be based upon the great foundations of moral life, and follow their lines. In other words, it should be animated by two spirits—the spirit of truth, and the spirit of charity. If these are present in full measure, two subordinate results will follow : the



work will be pure, and it will be noble. If they are present in imperfect measure, or, to put the same thing in a simpler form, if the writer is thinking of himself more than of his readers, of his own gain or his own intellectual gratification, the work will be less pure and less noble ; the whole effect being, of course, in all cases, proportionate to the genius of the writer.

By truth I do not mean what is called realism, and by charity I do not mean sentiment. M. Zola and his followers profess to describe human life exactly as it is, or nearly as it is, for, after all, no novelist will ever be able to describe everything. I may be wrong, but I confess that Zola appears to me to have missed his mark. If you are to describe life as it really is, you must take note of its heights as well as its depths, and you must have a firm hold, in your intellect and imagination, of the organic connection between them,

of the wonderful correlation of moral forces which human life everywhere exhibits. You must be ideal as well as real, to use two phrases of which one gets somewhat weary. The ideal is, after all, nothing outside us. It is the highest and best of what is within us. *The kingdom of God is within you.* What do we know of the possibilities of human effort, of the life of hero or saint or martyr, unless it be from what the hero and saint and martyr have actually thought, imagined, and done, and from the sympathetic echo which their thoughts, imaginations, and deeds awaken in our own breasts? It is the constant absorption of the lower elements of life into the higher, the reality of both in their mutual relation, that is the real theme of the novelist. A novel need not be impure because it is true; it is impure only if it reveal the fact that, in the novelist's own mind, the baser elements are the more real.

I find it impossible to read much of Zola, because of what seems to me the want of proportion in his view of human society. This want of proportion is destructive of beauty, and is, therefore, a literary as well as a moral blemish; in short, Zola's realism is not only a crime but an error. On the other hand, Balzac appears to me to be a realist of the right kind, because, with all his grasp of the lower side of life, he never loses sight of its sublime possibilities. He regards man as a living whole, not as a headless galvanized body. The same may, I think, be said of Thackeray, who no doubt would have written with even greater truth and freedom than he has done had he not stood too much in awe of the susceptibilities of his English public. What could give a more terrible picture of the gaunt realities of wickedness than the following passage from "A Gambler's Death," in the "Paris Sketch-Book"?—

"We sallied forth, and speedily arrived at the hotel which Attwood inhabited still. He had occupied, for a time, very fine apartments in this house; and it was only on arriving there that day, that we found he had been gradually driven from his magnificent suite of rooms *au premier* to a little chamber on the fifth story. We mounted, and found him. It was a little shabby room, with a few articles of rickety furniture, and a bed in an alcove; the light from the one window was falling full upon the bed and the body. Jack was dressed in a fine lawn shirt; he had kept it, poor fellow, *to die in*; for in all his drawers and cupboards there was not a single article of clothing; he had pawned everything by which he could raise a penny—desk, books, dressing-case, and clothes; and not a single halfpenny was found in his possession.

"He was lying as I have drawn him, one hand on his breast, the other falling

towards the ground. There was an expression of perfect calm on the face, and no mark of blood to stain the side towards the light. On the other side, however, there was a great pool of black blood, and in it the pistol; it looked more like a toy than a weapon to take away the life of this vigorous young man. In his forehead, at the side, was a small black wound; Jack's life had passed through it; it was little bigger than a mole.

“‘Regardez un peu,’ said the landlady, ‘messieurs, il m’a gâté trois matelas, et il me doit quarante quatre francs.’

“This was all his epitaph: he had spoilt three mattresses, and owed the landlady four-and-forty francs. In the whole world there was not a soul to love him or lament him. . . .

“Beside Jack's bed, on his little ‘table de nuit,’ lay the remains of his last meal, and an open letter, which we read. It was from one of his suspicious

acquaintances of former days, and ran thus—

“ ‘Où es tu, cher Jack ? *why you not come and see me ?* tu me dois de l'argent, entends-tu ? un chapeau, une cachemire, *a box of the Play.* Viens demain soir, je t'attendrai *at eight o'clock*, Passages des Panoramas. *My Sir is at his country.*

“ ‘Adieu à demain.

“ ‘FIFINE.’

“ ‘Samedi.’

“I shuddered as I walked through this very Passage des Panoramas, in the evening. The girl was there, pacing to and fro, and looking in the countenance of every passer-by, to recognize Attwood. *Adieu à demain*—there was a dreadful meaning in the words, which the writer of them little knew.”

What can be more real, and yet what could suggest more to the imagination or more profoundly stir the moral

emotions? Let us for a moment pause, and see what Thackeray can be in his mood of exquisite tenderness. I quote the end of the tenth chapter of the second volume of *The Newcomes*.

"Clive sees the carriage drive away after Miss Newcome has entered it without once looking up to the window where he stands. When it is gone he goes to the opposite windows of the salon, which are open towards the garden. The chapel music begins to play from the convent next door. As he hears it he sinks down, his head on his hands.

"*Enter Madame de Florac. (She goes to him with anxious looks.)* What hast thou, my child? Hast thou spoken?

"*Clive (very steadily).* Yes.

"*Madame de F.* And she loves thee? I know she loves thee.

"*Clive.* You hear the organ of the convent?

"*Madame de F.* Qu'as tu?

"*Clive*. I might as well hope to marry one of the sisters of yonder convent, dear lady. (*He sinks down again, and she kisses him.*)

"*Clive*. I never had a mother, but you seem like one.

"*Madame de F.* Mon fils! Oh, mon fils!"

Thackeray is true and tender; pure, therefore, and noble.

To speak of Dickens is hardly necessary, for I think he is better known, certainly he is better understood, than Thackeray, who veils his great qualities under a kind of aristocratic reserve. I would only say that if there be any novelist of genius anywhere whose work is based upon charity, upon love for his kind, sympathy for the weak, the healthy worship of goodness, it is Dickens. The fantastic, grotesque, unreal, theatrical element in him will be forgiven by posterity for this. I know no work of his in which the real mind and heart



of the man is more plainly revealed than in that strange story of "The Haunted Man," printed among his "Christmas Books." It is the tale of a man who, over-sensitive and with an over-mastering memory, obtains from a spirit the power of forgetting all his past recollections. With this power he loses, also, all his power to sympathize with suffering; the springs of his moral nature are broken, and he blights the moral nature of others. "'Give me back *myself*!'" exclaimed Redlaw like a madman. 'I am infected! I am infectious! I am charged with poison for my own mind, and the minds of all mankind. Where I felt interest, compassion, sympathy, I am turning into stone. Selfishness and ingratitude spring up in my blighted footsteps. I am only so much less base than the wretches whom I make so, that in the moment of their transformation I can hate them.'"

Had I not prosed long enough, I

might have said a few words on the great living Russian novelist, Count Leo Tolstoi. The applause with which you receive his name shows me that you are familiar with his books, and this fact of itself relieves me of the necessity of talking long. I will therefore only say this—that the greatness of Tolstoi seems to me to consist in his almost unique combination of a prosaic grasp of common facts and everyday life with an extraordinary strength of moral vision. By the aid of this vision Tolstoi beholds our ordinary life elevated, transformed, glorified. He is not only a great artist (I mean in the wider sense, for his workmanship is defective), but a moralist of profound spiritual insight, who has steeped his mind and heart in the teaching of the New Testament. I would call your attention especially to the view which he is always either propounding or suggesting, that it is often not until the approach of death that the true

relations of things are borne in upon us. Read the account of the illness and death of the Prince André, in "War and Peace," and say whether the moral imagination of man has ever risen higher. Then his powerful apprehension and interpretation of the old truth, that in the simple service of his fellow-men lies a man's only lasting happiness,—how beautifully is it repeated and enforced, more especially in his later allegories. His notion of a return to a primitive communistic life, in which wealth-hunting and war and violence, and with them literature and science, should cease, is, I suppose, more easily comprehensible when we remember that the village communities of Russia have, in times past, approached a certain way towards its realization. To an inhabitant of Western Europe, with its highly developed city life and the consequent complexity of its civilization, Tolstoi's idea must appear a dream.

But there are dreams and dreams, and from Tolstoi's dreams one would rather not awake.

(12) Can literature, in these its aspects, be made an instrument of moral education for the numberless children whom we are daily teaching to read, but providing with very little direction what to read? I was much struck with a suggestion of Lord Armstrong's, made, I think, some months ago in one of the magazines, that two hours or so every week should be set aside in elementary schools for the reading of good novels to the children. To say nothing of such writers as Hood and Dickens, English literature is singularly rich in good works of fiction. Could not two hours a week in elementary schools be spared (say) from the analysis of sentences, or the geography of Siberia, to the reading aloud, by the masters to their classes, of writers like Hood and Dickens? Such a lesson would, no doubt, not be

disciplinary. But I believe that many children would remember all their lives long something of what they learned in it, and that is more than can be said for a great many lessons, the sole object of which is mental gymnastics.

In trying to recapitulate these scattered and inadequate remarks, I would say that what I have endeavoured to convey might be summed up in the observation that the moral force of a book is always in direct proportion to the moral force of its author. The works of Mill and Carlyle are moral forces ; but how much greater do we feel the men to be than their books ! The voice is much, but the speaker is more. This, and much more that I have said, is, I fear, a truism ; but I am not without hope that you may feel what I remember once hearing said with regard to an obvious proposition, that "though a truism, it is nevertheless true."

*Classical Education in the Past  
and at Present*



# CLASSICAL EDUCATION

IN THE PAST

AND AT PRESENT.<sup>1</sup>

I SHALL endeavour, in the few remarks which I am going to make on this subject, to give some idea of the origin of classical education, and the different character and position which it has necessarily assumed, under the pressure of varying circumstances, at different periods of history. This may perhaps make it easier to realize on what ground it stands at present, and what services it can still render in modern civilized communities.

The principle underlying the system

<sup>1</sup> A Lecture delivered before the Teachers' Guild, Oxford, November, 1889.



of classical education was originally this: that it was a good thing for a boy to know the best literature, because the best literature would furnish him not only with models of artistic composition, but with words of practical wisdom which might aid him in the realization of moral truth.

All educational material must be, from the nature of the case, a small selection from the great mass of knowledge; but the smaller this mass of knowledge is at any period, the larger, of course, will be the proportion which the material of education bears towards it. At the present time our great difficulty lies in the vastness of the field around us. The amount which can be known is infinite, but the limitations of each individual mind remain, and are likely to remain, what they always have been.

If we wish to find a people, and a period of history, which in this respect presented conditions almost diametri-

cally opposed to those of our own day, we cannot do better than look at the Athenians in the early and middle parts of the fifth century B.C. It was among the Athenians, and at this time, that the principle of classical education first took root. It exhibited itself in a very simple form. An Athenian boy, for all his literature, learned his Homer and something of the best lyric poets. He had some, but not much, difficulty about the language; certainly not so much, I should imagine, as a modern English boy would have in learning Chaucer. We may realize this state of things by supposing that no English boy learned anything at school in the way of literature but certain passages of the Bible and Shakespeare, read, explained, and committed to memory.

A boy's literary education would probably, at this period of Athenian history, stop at this point; but if he were wealthy and wished to enter

public life, it is very likely that he would, as a young man, get some further education in the art of public speaking. One can hardly exaggerate the importance of this art in classical antiquity. In all cities which had a republican constitution, and they were very numerous, it was absolutely necessary for a man who aspired to a leading position. The Sophists, as they are now called, were to a large extent professors of the art of persuasion. They taught the young speaker how to arrange his matter, to put his points, and to polish his style. The beautiful prose style which is one of the ornaments of Greek literature was, in great part, formed by the influence of these teachers and their pupils. Even historical prose was, to a considerable degree, moulded on the prose of the orators. The lessons of the Sophists, or teachers of speaking and such knowledge as bore on speak-

ing, were partly lessons in the art of prose composition, and may so far be regarded as a part of literary, or what we should now call classical, education.

With the establishment of the Macedonian empire, and the extinction of freedom at Athens, another period in the history of classical education may be dated. Alexandria became the intellectual centre of Greek civilization. The Ptolemies founded great libraries there, and gathered round them savants and scholars from other parts of the world. The rich vein of genius which, from the time of Pindar and Æschylus to that of Demosthenes and Plato, had been so fertile of great works, became exhausted. An age of scholars and savants succeeded the age of poets, historians, orators, and philosophers. Much great and lasting work was done in the third and second centuries B.C. The foundations of physical science and of criticism, literary and philological,

were firmly laid. And it was in this period that literary education first began to assume the shape which it has worn ever since. It then became an education in a literature which, if not dead, belonged to the past, the spirit of which was extinct, and its form only to be restored by imitation.

Inseparably connected with this feature of classical study in the Alexandrian period is another; I mean the organization of literary and philological criticism into a system. It was necessary, on the one hand, to select from the large mass of good writing offered by the Athenian literature those works which seemed best suited for educational purposes. Accordingly we now find the masters of criticism, Aristophanes of Byzantium and his pupil Aristarchus, in the first half of the third century B.C., forming canons of the best poets, orators, and historians; canons which were in later

times naturally enlarged or modified, but which, from that time to this, have exercised a great influence in the educational and even in the literary world. As the selection had to be made upon some principle or principles, it came to be thought part of the duty of a professor to give his higher classes something in the way of literary criticism; some remarks justifying the position which was assigned in the canon to the author they were reading. I grieve to say that one result of this was that bits of literary criticism were handed on unaltered from one master to another, and, we must suppose, epitomized and learned by heart by the pupils.

On the other hand, it was necessary that the selected authors should be read in good texts; and the necessity of forming and handing down such texts created the science of philological criticism. The professor was forced to ask, Can Homer, or Pindar, or Æschylus,

really have said this? If not, what did he say? If he said it, how is the usage to be explained? Commentaries thus began to be formed, parts of which have, in forms no doubt much abridged, and therefore very inadequate, survived to the present day.

It will be seen that classical education has now ceased to be the simple matter that it was in the time of Pericles. No author can now be taught without a considerable amount of professorial criticism, æsthetic and philological. The texts are encumbered with comment. The next change which takes place strengthens the inevitable tendency already begun.

Before the close of the third century B.C., a new political power had won a commanding position in the south of Europe. Italy under the lead of Rome had vanquished Carthage; Rome was thus becoming a great commercial centre, and was urging imperial pretensions; a

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collision between the Italian and the Macedonian empires was sooner or later inevitable. The Romans were as eager to submit to the Greeks in the field of letters as they were to conquer them in the field of battle. They had a great history behind them, a record of social and political achievement to which no city of Greece could show a parallel. They had literary records of all this, in their own national prose and poetry. But the Greeks had long been busy in the Italian cities—busy with the history and antiquities of Rome, eager to convince the Romans that their origin, and with it their religion and mythology, were Greek or Trojan—anything but what they really were. There was then no such thing as historical criticism, in the proper sense of the word. What there was was in the hands of the Greeks, whose writers were able and accomplished to a degree which no Italian could yet hope to attain. The Romans



swallowed the lying tale, passively allowed their own mythology and antiquities to be corrupted, and left a legacy of endless difficulties to us unfortunate modern scholars. One can hardly blame them for this; and there is another point in their conduct for which they deserve nothing but praise. They recognized to the full the transcendent merits of the Greek literature, and set themselves, with genuine modesty, to learn from the Greek masters. Latin literature, as we have it, began with translations and adaptations from the Greek, and was at hardly any time wholly independent of Greek influence.

This important fact had an inevitable effect upon education. To learn Greek and understand Greek literature soon became an ambition of the wealthier classes in Italy, and in spite of much opposition on the part of some friends of the national language and literature,

Greek had become, before the last century of the republic, a regular part of liberal education at Rome. To learn how to write Latin hexameters, boys learned the metre of Homer; to master the principles of harmonious composition in prose, they wrote Greek prose exercises. Classical education had become bilingual. A new difficulty was added to it—that of mastering a foreign language and entering into the niceties and refinements of a foreign literature. By the end of the first century A.D., a canon of good Latin authors had been formed, and the phrase *classicus*, or *belonging to the first class*, was applied to those who were thought to deserve that position.

Literary education had now attained a fixed type, which, so far as I know, it retained for centuries. No doubt, with the decline of learning which set in after the beginning of the second century A.D., it degenerated in many

schools into a mere getting up of fragments of literature and manuals of learning ; but the idea or principle remained the same. The masterpieces of literature were studied mainly as things of beauty, as models for style ; only secondarily as storehouses of thought or information. The conception was identical with that prevalent at Athens in the age of Pericles ; only the subject, with the manifold accretions of time, had become more complex and difficult.

To what extent the great writers of Greece and Rome were known and studied in the Middle Ages I am not competent to say ; but I suppose that the influence which they exercised upon thought and feeling cannot have been extensive, otherwise the Renaissance of the fifteenth century would have been a far less important phenomenon than it was. Or rather there would have been no Renaissance or new birth at all.

What the fact really was we all know. The rediscovered literature of antiquity was regarded not only as a monument of beauty, but as a storehouse of moral and political wisdom, as containing the authentic basis of history and science, as revealing the possibilities of a free and humane life. Hence the passion, which the lapse of four centuries has not exhausted in the civilized world, for attaining a correct view of antiquity, for restoring its texts, piecing together its broken monuments, realizing the course of ancient history, living again in ancient thought and feeling.

The ardour of discovery which animated the scholars of the Renaissance and the Reformation was strong enough to give Greek and Latin literature a permanent place in education side by side with the Scriptures and the manuals of Christian doctrine. In this instance men acted, as they often do, upon the sound instinct which prompts them to

embody in their life and action as many elements of good as they can, without inquiring whether those elements, if suffered each to attain its own development, might not turn out to be antagonistic, or even mutually exclusive.

The theory according to which the Greek and Latin classics were regarded as the main storehouse of human wisdom was a theory which, from its very nature, was doomed in the course of time to extinction. For, even supposing it to be true in its full extent, it is obvious that the lessons taught by the classics must, in the course of studying them, be absorbed into modern literature, and become part of the common stock of cultivated opinion. Since the Renaissance we find, accordingly, that this point of view has been gradually abandoned, and that two other aspects of the classics have come into prominence. I will term these two aspects the literary and the scientific respectively.

The literary aspect is that with which we are the most familiar in England, and which has also been dominant, I think, in France. But the recent history of classical education has been, I believe, different in France and in England. In France the Revolution dealt, for a time, a serious blow to the study of Greek in the public schools, and the literary study of Latin has served, hand in hand with that of French, as the main instrument for the culture of literary taste. In England we have fortunately had no revolution for two hundred years. Greek has never been banished from our schools; and the Greek as well as the Latin language and literature have been studied mainly as models of expression and composition; as a means of developing the literary feeling which was long regarded as a natural, if not necessary, characteristic of a cultivated Englishman.

By the scientific aspect of the classics I mean the view which regards them, not

exclusively, or even mainly, as models of literary composition, but as historical documents, or material for reconstructing a truthful representation of ancient life in all its aspects, moral, religious, social, literary, and political. This view might, in the time of Scaliger have been called the French view, while the literary view was predominant in Italy. The more serious study of classical philosophy passed, however, with Scaliger, from France to Holland and, later on, from Holland to Germany. In Germany, for more now than a century, this field of intellectual labour has found many of its most illustrious representatives. It is this historical and philosophical tradition (for philology is really a subsidiary branch of history and philosophy), consolidated if not founded by the genius of Friedrich Wolf, which has formed the strength of classical study in Germany for a century past. Without an ideal so ennobling, the prodigious labour spent

upon the classics in Germany could never have been maintained ; it must have starved long ago for want of an adequate motive. I speak advisedly of an historical and philosophical *tradition*. We have had great scholars in England, but no progressive tradition of advancing knowledge. We honour our scholars, and found prizes and scholarships bearing their names ; the results of their work are soon snapped up by teachers and examiners ; but the spirit of their work—how many are found to cherish this, the most precious thing they had to bequeath, and to make it the animating principle of their own lives ?

I suppose that few enlightened educationists in England would now contend that the Greek and Latin classics should form the exclusive, or almost exclusive, instrument of a liberal education. The field of knowledge has been immensely widened. Other literatures assert themselves as worthy of study



side by side with those of ancient Greece and Italy. And, whether the literature be ancient or modern, few would now maintain that an education mainly or entirely literary ought to be the only kind of education encouraged by a great and civilized nation. The importance, now generally recognized, of physical science as the right means of training for some, perhaps for many, minds, is the great educational fact of to-day. My own opinion is of very little value in this matter. But I may perhaps say that I have no faith in a little science taught in classical schools, or a little Latin taught in scientific schools. I look forward to a time when the modern and the classical types of school shall be so separated as to ensure in each a training as thorough in its kind as was the best classical education of forty or fifty years ago. In the classical schools I would have the education as complete,

as wide, and as simple as possible, so as to serve as a solid basis for future study, either in literature proper, or in history and philosophy.

No doubt such a separation of ancient and modern must result in a certain amount of rivalry between the two systems. And many, I dare say, are apprehensive that, what with the increasing prominence given to physical science, the growing mercantile spirit, and the depressingly low standard of literary taste among the large half-educated public which constitutes so large a part of all modern societies, the Greek and Latin classics will go to the wall. I do not share this apprehension. Classical education survived a serious attack on the part of the champions of "useful knowledge" some sixty years ago. At present most enlightened educationists would probably say that we have not too little, but too much of it, in England. What is wanted is to

ensure a larger variety in the subjects selected from the vast and increasing mass of knowledge for the purposes of serious mental training, and thus, as far as possible, confining the study of the Greek and Latin classics to those who are likely to profit by it. The ideal of education is that not a single mind should be thrown away upon a study for which it is unfit. The ideal of national culture is that not a single branch of valuable knowledge should be unrepresented in the national schools and universities. No reasonable man, probably, would desire that the study of the Greek and Latin classics should perish out of the land. They cannot, it is true, be any longer regarded as the chief storehouse of knowledge, or as furnishing us with absolute canons of composition and criticism. But the Agamemnon of Æschylus is still the greatest tragedy that has ever been written; no amount of criticism and

dissection will affect the commanding literary position of the Homeric poems ; Pindar, Sophocles, Aristophanes, Demosthenes, Herodotus, Thucydides, Cicero, Tacitus, remain where they were. To say anything more of the classics in their literary aspect would be flat and affected. But there is another point on which, perhaps, I may be pardoned if I linger for a moment.

It must be remembered that the classics have still more than a merely literary function to perform. Greece was the mother not only of poetry and oratory, but—at least for the European world—of philosophy. And by philosophy I do not mean merely a succession of metaphysical and ethical systems, but the active love of knowledge, the search for truth. Will it be said that this spirit is not now as necessary an element in civilized human life as it ever was? In the long run it would almost appear as if it were mainly this

